

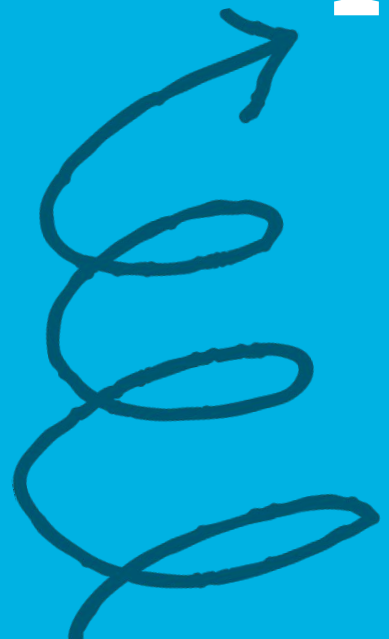
# SRE & Product Management

## How to level up your team (and career!) by thinking like a product manager

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# Sometimes SREs must do product management.






# You: Jen, what?



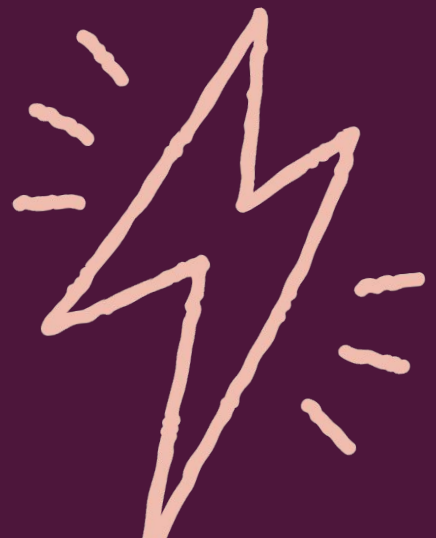
# Jen: Yes

# Product vs Program Management

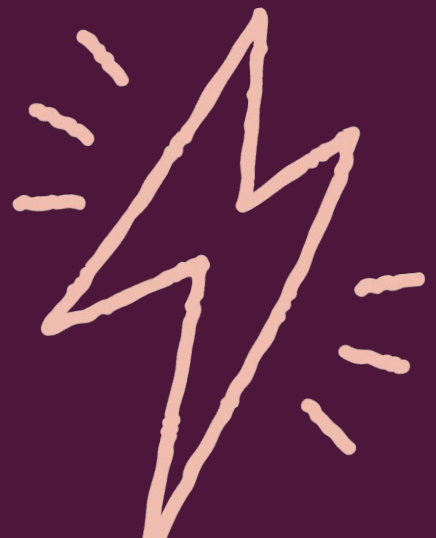
## Some key differences

| Product | Program |
| --- | --- |
| Prioritize **ideation** to impact business | Prioritize **implementation** to impact business |
| Closer to **users** | Closer to **engineers** |
| Often focus on **growth of product** | Often focus on **health of tech stack** |
| **What and why?** | **When and how?** |

# When do SREs do product management?



# All the time!



# Common SRE product work

## You do these things.

- proof of concept experiments
- creating alert plans
- rolling out a new deployment process
- stuff with UIs, like Prometheus dashboards
- internally negotiating and creating SLAs with your team and other teams
- and more!





# Um, but why should you listen to me?

# Listen to me.

## Plz.

- BuzzFeed's infrastructure/SRE TPM
  - Initially focused on products to escape toil
  - Struggled to create broadly useful data and platform infrastructure
- Failed. Then learned from lead product designer
- Took learnings to LinkedIn's product SRE org and iterated
- Now at Fastly as a product manager for platform engineering



# Product management is about meeting needs.



# Product management is about EMPATHY.





# It doesn't matter WHO does product work as long as it gets done.

– me, but don't tell my PM colleagues

# Let your inner product manager shine.



# 1

# Know your users and talk to them

# 1. Know your users and talk to them.

- Most users of your SRE products are other engineers at your company.

- Just because you sit near them or have a similar job title … **do not assume** you know how they work or use your product or service



# User Interviews

## Do them!

- 30 mins
- Interview no more than 2 people at a time
- Interview team leads and managers separately from ICs.
  - They have different jobs and uses tools differently.
- Feel free to bring **one** teammate to help you interview.
- Share user interview findings with your team.
  - presentations
  - video watching party
  - quotes

# 2

# Ask non-leading questions

# 2. Ask non-leading questions.

## Examples

| | Leading | Non-leading |
|---|---|---|
| Chef | Do you have problems with Chef at Fastly? | Have you created a Chef cookbook at Fastly? If so, tell me when and walk me through how. |
| A spreadsheet documenting a major compliance effort | Do you wish correlating estimated resource weeks to priority happened automatically? | Do you use the SRE-compliance spreadsheet? Do you find any columns on the spreadsheet more useful than others? How so? |
| Deployment | Why does your team do so few deploys? And why are they always huge? | What are the steps to go from code committed to code successfully running in production for the application you work on? |

# 3

# Prototyping sprints

# 3. Prototyping sprints are wonderful!

- One week, one focus for all involved
- Narrow in on core users (some are more important than others)
- Limited time forces limited scope
- Team bonding



# 4

# Add user-centric goals to roadmaps

# 4. Add user-centric goals to roadmaps

## Simple Example

| Project | Stakeholders | User-centric Goal | Deliverables | Deliverable Status |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Make tacos | family members | feed the family cheaply and quickly on a weeknight | buy tacos shells, ground beef and seasoning | Done |
| | | | stretch goal: find affordable side, like refried beans | Won't do |
| | | | cook food | In progress |
| | | | serve food | Possible delay |
| Higher priority projects above | | | | |
| Lower priority projects below | | | | |
| Make dessert | family members | feed the family a cheap post-dinner sweet | defrost cheesecake | At risk |
| | | | serve cheesecake | At risk |

# Roadmaps

## Do you even roadmap, bro?

- Including more than just technical deliverables helps **define scope**.
- User-centric goals answer **what and why**?
- Deliverables answer **how and when**?

# Roadmap

## Engineering example

| Project | Stakeholders | User-centric goal | Deliverable |
|---|---|---|---|
| New CI pilot | Eng leads at company | Get early feedback on the new CI pipeline before general rollout to all of eng | User interviews & share findings |
| | | | Architecture design doc |
| | | | Select one eng team for pilot |
| | | | Technical deliverable 1 |
| | | | Technical deliverable 2 … |
| | | | Migrate team's services |
| | | | SRE <> pilot eng team retro |
| New CI general availability | Eng leads at company | Improve all engineers' CI workflows | TBD: Transition all non-legacy applications with owners to new CI |
| New CI final phase | Eng leads at company | Reduce risks to the engineering org | TBD: Transition legacy and ownerless apps to new CI |

# How to use a roadmap?

- Add updates to the roadmap weekly or bi-weekly in dedicated meeting
- Team lead shares screen
- Update statuses line by line for incomplete projects and deliverables
- Be willing to occasionally move high priority projects down to low priority section
- Quarterly retrospective on roadmapping process, estimation and project execution

# Roadmap Note

**The roadmap spreadsheet is an internal tool.**

To share project status, do not just share the spreadsheet.

Make it easy for your manager, other teams, and stakeholders to understand your progress:

- bi-weekly emails
- monthly status meetings

5

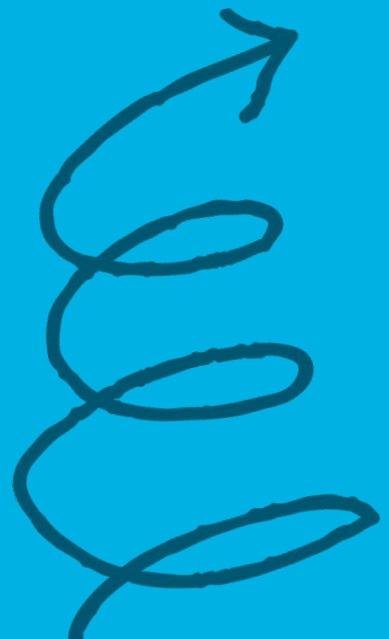
# Follow-up with users regularly

# 5. Follow up with your users regularly.

- Users needs and pain points change
- Follow-up with users after releasing a product or feature
- And at major development milestones



# Recap



# SRE & Product Management

1

**User relationships!**

Know your users and talk to them

2

**Non-leading questions!**

Ask non-leading question.

3

**Prototyping sprints!**

Prototyping sprints are wonderful.

4

**User-centric goals!**

Add user-centric goals to roadmaps.

5

**Follow-up with users!**

Follow-up with users regularly.

# Thank you!

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